

Memories of Mendip Hospital



Josie Bosley

*First published 2000
by Gerald D. Burton
Wells, Somerset, Great Britain*

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In memory of
my husband, Harold

Foreword to the Second Edition

What today is the village of South Horrington, near Wells, was for 143 years the Mendip Hospital, or Somerset & Wells Lunatic Asylum, as it was originally known. For almost half that time, my mother was closely associated in various ways with the hospital.

By the 1980s, the closure of Mendip was on the horizon, and her unique insight into it seemed too valuable a piece of history to be lost. I well remember her starting, with pen and several notepads, to write this book. With the help and encouragement of the late Gerald Burton and Dr Robin Rees, it was launched in July 2000. My mother passed away in February 2009.

Interest in her book has continued to the extent that it is no longer in print. Dr Rees and I have therefore turned to a new publishing medium, the Internet, and I am grateful to the Internet Archive for facilitating this.

Jane Weightman
February 2012

Foreword to the First Edition

I remember Josie Bosley and her trio playing for ward parties in the years leading up to the closure of Mendip Hospital. I knew her old home – the Chief Male Attendant’s house – only after it had become the hospital pharmacy. I saw only one pantomime, and that years after Josie had ceased to be its musical director. I never knew the recreation hall without badminton markings on the floor; I do remember the old grand piano on the stage, regularly strummed for hours on end by a patient who believed himself to be a second Beethoven. Clearly I missed much that would have been good to see and hear. Dr Bridger was still Physician Superintendent – the last to occupy that position – and I remember his retirement, which closed an era. Many of the names Josie mentions bring back memories.

I went to work at the hospital in January 1967 as Medical Registrar and stayed for the rest of my working life. As great institutions do, Mendip Hospital developed a strong personality of its own. Its history spans and reflects a period of unprecedented social, medical and technological change. Its mid-life was disrupted and distorted twice by world wars. It knew the best of times and the worst of times. It won the family loyalty of a great company of staff and was home for many years to hundreds of patients. At times its tendency to take over one’s whole life had to be resisted. Its dying years were painful to those who had

known it at its best and it was sincerely mourned. Though it had adapted itself to changing circumstances with remarkable flexibility throughout its long life, and could have continued to do so, it had come to represent an outlook that was unfashionable and politically incorrect. It could not be allowed to survive: yet some of its traditions continue in the new framework.

All this is reflected by Mrs Bosley in her reminiscences and it is good that she has written them down. That she has undertaken the labour of doing so illustrates the important place the hospital held in the lives of so many who played a part in its life; the generosity and loyalty it inspired; and the goodwill in which its work was done.

Morag Hervey

Preface

My mother's father and later my father held the post of Chief Male Nurse at the Mendip Hospital in Wells. I was therefore born into a family that had very close ties with the hospital. My own association with the hospital also grew, as by playing the piano I was able to contribute to the patients' social well-being and entertainment over several decades.

In my seventies and with time to recollect, I began to write this account of my memories. With the imminent closure of the hospital, I felt that I possessed a piece of local history that was about to come to an end. The result is a personal insight into how the Mendip Hospital coloured my life, and a revealing look at the psychiatric hospital and how it served the people of Wells and district.

This book would not have seen the light of day without the help given by my daughter Jane, Gerald Burton and Dr Robin Rees. I am also grateful to my daughter Mary for her photographic contributions.

First Recollections of Mendip

Few octogenarians find themselves living in the very house in which they were born. I was born at 1 Georgeville Terrace, Wells. I now live at 17 Bath Road. *However, they are the same house!* My mother's mother and Aunt Gertie, mother's sister, lived next door at no. 2, now 19 Bath Road.

Some years earlier my father Joseph William Hall had been appointed as a nurse¹ at the Somerset & Wells Lunatic Asylum, as Mendip Hospital or *Mendip* was then called. It was strange how he became a nurse, as he was living at home near Camberley, Surrey, and answered an advertisement in the newspaper for a Leader of the Orchestra at Bath and Wells County Asylum. Father was a violinist, so he applied for the post and came down for the interview. He was then shocked to learn from the Medical Superintendent that he would also be expected to do nursing, which was the last thing he had ever thought of doing. But having been offered the job he decided to take it, and so moved from Surrey to Somerset.

In those days the single nurses had to live in the hospital, whilst the married ones lived out. There were a fixed number of single men on the staff, and a fixed number of married ones. If single nurses wanted to get

1 The words *attendant* and *nurse* were used at different times to describe the male nursing staff. The female staff, however, were always called *nurses*.

married, they had to wait for a vacancy. Sometimes, I understand, this meant a long wait. If they *got a girl in trouble*, as the expression was, it meant instant dismissal. How things have changed!

At the time my Dad joined the staff, the Head Attendant lived in a large house in the *Back Lane* at the hospital, opposite the church. He was a member of the orchestra, and I think the double bass was his instrument. He used to invite members of the orchestra to musical evenings at his house, and eventually Dad joined in those. He duly met the family, including the Head Attendant's daughter, who became my mother. So sometime later when there was a vacancy for a married nurse, Florence May Andrews married Joseph William Hall. At first they lived in a hospital house in Frome Road, Mum working in the Needleroom at the hospital. A lot of sewing was done there, the female nurses' uniforms all being made on the premises. I remember the green flannel-type dresses, white caps and aprons. Quite a few needlewomen were employed, together with several female patients. I remember how as a child I was given quite a large toy elephant made from scraps of the green material. After a couple of years my father bought 1 Georgeville Terrace, and I was born there on 12th January 1918.

I did not see much of Dad, as one week he would start work at 6.30 a.m. and finish at 5.30 p.m., whilst the next he would start at 9 a.m. and finish at 8.30 p.m. He had one day off a week and two ten-day leave periods a year. Then there were the *booked-in* days, as they were called. These occurred when some form of entertainment was held in the Recreation Hall (now the Ballroom) for the patients. Whoever was booked-in did not finish until 10.00 or 10.30 p.m. What a long day! As Dad was musical (he also joined the church choir), he was involved with entertainment for over 40 years.

I do not know what I thought the hospital actually was when I was a little girl. For some inexplicable reason it seemed special. I was a little afraid of the huge building, with the high walls around the *airing courts*, now car parks. But I loved going for walks, sometimes up the drive and

along the front. There were always lovely shrubs and flowers in the beds, and cows in the fields at the side of the main drive.

Dad's uniform was heavy navy serge material with brass buttons and a hard hat. He always had a whistle on a chain in his top pocket, and I have it still. He worked hard, passing his nursing exams, and was later a charge nurse. When I was a baby, his father-in-law Frederick Andrews bought no. 2, next door to us. I only just remember Grandfather Andrews, as I was about two years old when he died.

The hospital was referred to by a lot of people as simply *the House*. A conversation between Aunt Gertie (my mother's sister) or Gran (my mother's mother Martha) with someone would go something like this: 'Where does Billy work now?' Back would come the reply, 'Oh, up at the House'. I could not understand this.

As a little girl I remember the *walking parties*, when patients would be taken for a walk with several nurses. I used to watch them coming down the road, perhaps walking in twos. If they were female patients and anyone was coming in the opposite direction on the pavement, a nurse would call out, 'Walk to the side, please, ladies!' Of course, the male and female patients were taken out separately.

After I started school and it came to Christmastime, Dad was given permission for Mum and myself to go to the *smoking concert* held in the Hall on Christmas Eve. This was a highlight for me. A great deal of work went into this variety show performed by the members of staff, amongst whom there was a great deal of talent. Mum and I had to walk up to the hospital (there were no buses or street lights). I became so excited when we came to the drive and saw all the lights shining out of the windows of the huge building. Then we arrived at the centre door. The door, of course, was locked, but once we had been admitted by the hall porter, we waited for Dad, who took us to the Hall. I remember the corridors with their brown and green paint, all cold, dark and draughty, and with all the doors locked. Then we came to the Hall. Dad unlocked the door, and in we went. The Hall was beautifully decorated, with

paper shawl-type decorations made from brightly coloured tissue paper. Festoons of evergreen hung from the ceiling with paper flowers, roses mostly, all stuck in the greenery. All these were made by staff and patients. The paint was dark, and around the walls were large pictures in heavy frames. Accommodated on a small gallery halfway along the side of the hall was a mechanical organ which played from perforated paper rolls; I believe it was called an Orchestron. The organ was used for dances, and the rolls included overtures and Gilbert & Sullivan selections. I particularly remember the overture to *Poet and Peasant* by Suppé and that to *Zampa* by Herold. In later years, when silent films were shown in the Hall on a screen at the opposite end to the stage, this instrument was used to accompany them. Still later, when the annual Christmas Staff Dinner and Dance was held, bands were engaged to play.

For the smoking concerts the seating was divided down the centre, with female patients on the right, male on the left. The doctors, resident staff and guests all sat in the front rows of seats, and the first row was always reserved – with cushions on the seats, mark you – for the doctors and hospital committee; the rest of us sat on the hard seats. There was also a table with boxes of chocolates for the front row guests. The stage was very large and had beautiful red velvet curtains. I could hardly contain my excitement. At the interval the nurses would go round offering sweets to the ladies and cigarettes to the men. The concert was always good.

Whilst I was still quite young Dad taught me to read music. I used to accompany him with some easy tunes on the piano: *Mary of Argyll*, *The Ash Grove* and so on – they became harder as I grew older. I also used to do songs and dances, which the patients enjoyed: they always liked children.

When the evening was over and Dad had finished taking the patients back to the wards, he would walk us home, returning immediately on his bike to the hospital, as the choir and some of the concert party then

prepared to sing Christmas carols. They sang not only in most of the wards but for the doctors too, which meant quite a trek around *Westfield* and up to *Birdwood* on the Bath Road just before Horrington School. They sang at all the houses and farms in the hospital grounds, so that Dad would not arrive home until it was nearly time to get up again. He nearly always worked on Christmas Day, so Mum and I saw little of him.

The next excitement for everyone at the hospital was the New Year's Eve patients' Fancy Dress Ball. Everyone wore a costume; at midnight they held the Grand Parade around the Hall, and prizes were awarded for the best costumes. I was not allowed to go to any of these when I was young but did so several times when older. The aim, especially for the staff, was to be so disguised that it was difficult to guess who your partner was when dancing. This was an occasion when the patients mixed, and of course the staff danced with them too. Dad had everyone guessing one year, and only one person was let into the secret. He borrowed a ballet tutu from the dancing school where I was a pupil, and of course with various wigs he had to choose from, and tights. There was only one snag: Dad had a big black moustache. There was only one thing for it: he shaved it off. He only whispered when spoken to, and no one knew who he was. None of the men he danced with had a clue. Poor Mum: when he came home she didn't recognise him either!

There were refreshments, and the baker made large square fruit-cakes. Dad used to bring a piece of this *ball cake* home, and very good it was too.

The hospital had a messenger boy who, at the time Dad started there, rode a bike. Then he had a small horse and cart, almost a large trap. As a child I used to listen out to hear the pony and trap coming up or down the road. Later – probably in the early thirties – the pony and trap were superseded by a van.

When I was nine or ten years old or perhaps even a little younger, a different form of entertainment was introduced, something I really looked forward to: silent films were shown in the Hall on Monday

evenings. These were accompanied on the Orchestron, which Dad always pumped. Films were shown throughout the winter months, until about Easter time, so when it began to stay light until 6.30 p.m., which was the time the films started, Dad was given permission for me to go. I used to walk to my Auntie Eva's house in Frome Road and go up to the Hall with my cousins. All the resident staff could go if they wished. Afterwards at Auntie Eva's house we would all have cocoa and some bread and cheese, and perhaps a pickled onion. Dad had to help put patients to bed, ready for the night nurses, before he came off duty. He then called for me and took me home.

After I started work in millinery and gowns at *Madame Kate's* (by 2012 this had become an estate agent's office) in Wells High Street when I was fourteen, I was allowed to accompany Mum and Dad to the Annual Staff Ball held in January. This was a really good dance. Each member of staff was allowed to invite one visitor, their names being written on the tickets, which were not transferable. Some members of staff did not use their invitations, and in that way Dad was able to obtain a ticket for me. The strict regulations on the use of the Hall are hard to credit nowadays. No drinks were allowed in the ballroom and there were no bars, and if, as sometimes happened, someone was caught smuggling drink in, the Medical Superintendent would ask them to leave. Nor was it permitted to wear outdoor shoes; only dancing shoes could be worn. The floor was beautifully polished, the patients having spent hours wielding the *lazy backs*, as they called the heavy mops on handles. The refreshments were excellent. The tickets came in different colours and your supper time was printed on the ticket to avoid congestion in the refreshment rooms.

In earlier days, when my mother's father Frederick Andrews lived at the hospital, the Ball was held in a similar way, except that they had a sit-down meal: roast turkey or beef with all the trimmings and vegetables and puddings. This was always laid out in the church approach, leading from the side of the stage in the Hall, across Back Lane to the church.

This was a long, bridge-like room, affording ample space, with windows on one side which looked down onto Back Lane. My grandparents used to enjoy this evening very much. The ballroom was still decorated from Christmas Eve, as the trimmings were not taken down until after the Ball. The wards were always trimmed for Christmas. I myself never went through a ward, but did manage to see a little through the windows when the lights were on.

As the years passed, a lot of changes took place at Mendip, and at some stage the official name was changed from *The Asylum* to *The Mental Hospital*.

In time Dad became Deputy Head Nurse, formerly entitled Head Attendant. Some of the patients were now allowed out on parole. On Saturdays (and Wednesdays too, I think) they used to go down into Wells and look around the town. Many of the men went to the football matches; of course, they had to be back in the hospital by a certain time and, if they were not, a search party was sent out to look for them. Occasionally a patient would run away but would eventually be found. Patients were also allowed to see the November torchlight carnival in Wells. There were always good cricket and football teams, and in the hospital there was a first-class billiard room; so the staff and patients had plenty of sport.

A highlight of life at Mendip was the patients' sports afternoon, held once a year on the cricket pitch. Patients were seated all around the field, and as many as were able took part in the events. There were, however, many elderly and even some people in wheel-chairs who just watched, but everyone enjoyed the tea party. The event took a lot of organising, as staff had to be careful which patients to take outside. I do not think my father approved of patients being obliged to go out if they did not want to, or were old and infirm, especially if the weather was unsettled. But he did not make the rules, and it was a good day on the whole.

Next to the cricket pitch, the new female nurses' home was being built. I think it was started sometime in the late 1930s, but not

completed until after the war.

The hospital had its own resident fire brigade, of which my father was a member in his early years there. Many of the nurses had to be on call for fire duty.

The years went by, and more changes came to Mendip, especially in 1939 with the threat of war. Following the introduction of parole for the patients, a dance and a whist drive were held in the Hall on alternate Wednesdays. These events were much enjoyed by patients and staff alike – but still all the doors were kept locked.

Moving In

I first met my future husband as we were both leaving the Regal Cinema in Wells one day in 1936. We were close friends for some time and became engaged in 1939.

In the spring of that year my dear Mum passed away. She had never enjoyed robust health and was only 50 years of age. Dad and I were heartbroken, as was Harold to whom I was engaged. I was glad Mum had known him and that I was going to marry him. The threat of war was now upon us, and the hospital was in turmoil. By the time Harold and I were married in August, many of the staff – both nursing staff and men from the building yard and other trades – had been called up. Dad had now been promoted to Head Nurse. To prepare the hospital for war time – the black-out, rationing and so on – was an enormous task. The patients regarded my father as a friend, not as one of the remote, authoritarian figures of former times. He encouraged the patients to call him by his Christian name, Joe.

In early September 1939 Dad told us that we would have to move to the Head Nurse's house in Back Lane, as he had to be on call at all times. He did not put any pressure on Harold and me to move with him but thought that if Harold was called up, which was highly likely, it would be the sensible thing. At this time I was very worried about what course to take. On the one hand I did not like to think of Dad in that big house on

his own: when you are an only child the responsibility falls on you. On the other hand, though it is hard to believe in this day and age, there was a stigma attached to Mendip. Our friends seemed to feel it was unthinkable for us to move there. However, as I thought I would be going to have a baby in the summer, I consulted my doctor, who was a most understanding man. He said that it was a good idea to move with Dad and that I would be far better off living at Mendip for the duration of the war.

On 21st October 1939 we moved to Mendip. It was a lovely warm sunny day. I was sad to leave my house at Bath Road where I had lived all my life. Despite this, in a strange way I was also looking forward to my new surroundings.

Living In

Mendip was like a little self-contained town. I was now seeing the hospital differently from how I had seen it through a child's eyes. Apart from the main building which housed the patients (the male patients were at the Wells end of the hospital and the female at the Horrington end), there were extensive kitchens, the stores, administrative offices, the ball-room, games rooms and various other rooms and accommodation for nurses, and of course the church adjoined the main building through the church approach on Back Lane.

Dr Spence, one of the resident doctors, had a suite of rooms in the main building, and there too were the offices, the pharmacy and the needlerooms.

Dr McGarvey, the Medical Superintendent, lived in *Westfield*. This house was situated at the top of the drive, surrounded by beautiful gardens and trees. The next house, a little further towards *North Lodge* (that is, along the drive towards the Bath Road), was the male night nurses' house. We then came to *North Lodge* itself, standing just inside the drive and giving immediately onto the Bath Road. By the entrance to some of the building-yard workshops was the weighbridge. The clerk of the works (who at that time lived in the village of West Horrington) was in charge of bricklayers, plumbers, electricians, painters and decorators, the stokers in the boiler house – in fact, all the workmen connected with

the building in any way. Doubling back past the night nurses' house and turning left into Back Lane, one passed the undertaker's shop on the left, whilst on the right was the back of the hospital. There was a fire escape on the junction.

Passing an airing court on the right you then came to our house. Although it adjoined the main building of the hospital, it was on the corner of the entrance to a very large square, the house being on the lane side, on the right-hand side of the yard. There were also some padded rooms (cells, they used to be called) which had very small, narrow windows, and shutters instead of curtains. In the corner between our house and these rooms was another huge iron fire escape. Further round the square (or yard, as many people called it) was an entrance door to the hospital, and curtained windows; these were *mess rooms*. Continuing round, on the left-hand side were shops: the butcher's, the baker's and the shoemaker's. Looming up behind these was the roof of the ballroom with its huge dome in the centre. And so we found ourselves back at the entrance to the square. Immediately opposite us on the other corner of the square was another house, which in 1939 was the firemen's store house, where their equipment was kept.

Going on along Back Lane to the house, one passed double doors at the back of the stage; these provided access for any scenery or large props needed for entertainment; bands also took their instruments in by that route. Then we came to the boiler house with its tall chimney, the dairy, another square, airing courts (female), and wards with side rooms. We then came to the junction where you could turn left to continue to the Bath Road, passing *Hillside* on the left, a really large house where female patients lived (I think these were on parole). The gates to the drive were always locked. On the right-hand side were a couple of small houses in which staff bricklayers' families lived at that time. There was also a larger house, but I cannot remember whether patients or staff lived there. Then we came to a little wood, *Nettlecombe*. Harold and I used to have lovely walks up there, and in the spring of 1940 we picked

white and blue violets and primroses. There were lots of birds, especially rooks, and they made such a noise.

Turning right at the junction from the hospital, the lane went down to Frome Road. *Home Farm* was at the bottom of the lane. There were several houses in Frome Road. They were occupied by the two Head Gardeners (one for kitchen and one for flowers) together with building-yard and farm workers. The Farm Bailiff lived at *Knapp Hill Farm*, on the Bath Road going towards Wells.

Mendip was surrounded by beautiful scenery: fields, woods, golf links and all the hospital's own shrubs and flowers. The view from the centre front was lovely, looking across to Glastonbury Tor.

Our house was spacious. Its back entrance gave onto the lane and its front door, with a small glazed porch, onto the square. There were laurel bushes in front, and also under the rooms on the right of the square. It was good to have a bit of green against all the grey walls around you. The entrance hall was large; it had windows and a big cupboard under the wide stairs. Two sitting rooms led off to the right, one off the other. The one with the bay windows overlooked the lane, whilst the bigger one with very large windows overlooked the square. On the left of the hall was the lavatory, very large, with a big window, then the linen room. This had an old-fashioned black range and a small window facing the lane. On one side was the larder, which was very useful. It was a small room with windows on one side. Especially useful so far as I was concerned was that it had a marble top, a long slab, ideal for leaving meat and fats to cool, and also for making pastry. Leading off the other side of the living room was the hallway inside the back door. The kitchen was on the left, the coal house straight in front. The kitchen was a long narrow room with a small window by the sink. There was a very old gas stove, but also two big tables with plenty of shelves all around.

There was quite a large landing upstairs, again with windows overlooking the square. Like the downstairs, one room led off the other. There were two large bedrooms. Dad had the one to the right of the

landing; the bathroom adjoined this room. On the left was a large room leading to quite a small room; Harold and I chose the small room because the window looked onto the kitchen garden and the distant hills.

My father's wages were quite low, but the emoluments went a long way to make up for this. He was provided with the house, with a constant supply of hot water, electricity, gas, coal and firewood. Moreover, every day a basket of vegetables and fruit (whatever was available at the time) was delivered; I can still see in my mind's eye the basket that awaited us when we moved in. We enjoyed runner beans (in October), carrots, cabbage, lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, apples, pears and a few late raspberries, potatoes and the odd marrow. Once a week flowers were delivered, and there were always pot plants if we wanted them. Pot plants were everywhere, it seemed, in the hospital. Milk and cream we collected from the dairy. Bread we bought. We also bought our meat, a lot of which was home-killed; it was always good. Occasionally we managed to get some cake. We could not use war rations for groceries at the hospital, but instead stayed with our grocer in Wells for all the tea, sugar, butter and so on.

The vegetables, flowers, coal, firewood, etc. applied also to the doctors, the store-keeper, who lived at *North Lodge*, and the Head Clerk, who was at the *Bottom Lodge* (Knapp Hill). The emoluments applied also to the rest of the staff who lived in the other hospital houses. I am not sure whether or not they paid any rent for their houses, but they certainly all received plenty of everything, one way and another.

We also had asparagus, plums and greengages when in season, and even wall peaches were grown. Had we been a large family (as my grandfather's was, with no fewer than eleven children), Dad would have received more, but we were only a small family, so our needs were less.

At the top of the kitchen garden was the *San*, where infectious illnesses were treated. In latter years, before Mendip closed, these buildings were turned into the occupational therapy department.

In the laundry a large staff was employed, and male and female patients also did their share of the work. Walking up Back Lane past the laundry, you could always smell washing boiling, and the steam used to come pouring out. I was fascinated by the large laundry baskets on wheels that were used. I do not think they had tyres, because from the house I could hear them being rolled down the lane and across the square into the hospital. Usually they were pushed, piled high with sheets, shirts, etc., by male patients. They also did the doctors' laundry, and I used to see dear old Beattie (one of the patients) walking past our house with Dr McGarvey's baskets. I remember noticing beautifully starched and ironed pillow cases and tablecloths on top.

The gardening gangs of patients, with staff, used the square to enter and leave the hospital, and the main gate to the garden was opposite to us.

Soon after we moved to Mendip, with already approximately 950 patients of its own, Park Prewit Hospital, Basingstoke, was converted into a military hospital, so all the patients (but without the staff) were evacuated to Wells. There were now 1,300 patients. With staff already in short supply, it was a difficult and very hard-working time. I do not know how they got them all bedded, but of course they did. Not surprisingly, I did not see much of Dad.

Jack

Jack Curtis was born, unwanted, in a Union in Devon. He was moved from one institution to another until as a young man he was sent to the Asylum in Wells. This had been his home for a good many years. Before we moved to Mendip, Dad told me about Jack and thought it would be a good idea for him to help me with the work. Jack had helped Mrs Henderson, the Head Nurse's wife, who had previously occupied the house. I was somewhat nervous about this idea. It was one thing to have an occasional chat with some of the patients, but another to have one around the house. So I told Dad that I could manage quite well on my own. He did not press the subject, but I know he thought I was silly and, as usual, he was right.

There were a few patients who helped residential staff; that is, the doctors, Mrs Coates at *Bottom Lodge*, and Dad. I thought Dad would explain to Jack, but I did not then realise what a determined person Jack was. On our first day he called and asked me if he could start, and explained that he always 'did' for Mrs Henderson. I told him that when I got straight after the move I would let him know if I needed him to do anything. So began life in Back Lane.

Jack was quite a character. He always wore a cap, usually a bit to one side on his head, and did not miss much of what was going on. Every day Jack called, and I always gave him the same answer – and a piece of

Jack

cake. Then after about a week, I opened the door to see him holding tightly clasped in his hand a bunch of pansies and other small flowers, which he thrust up into my face, saying, 'Now can I start?' What could I say? So Jack 'started'.

He really was very useful. He would fetch the milk in a milk can from the dairy, pick up the coal, chop firewood, and clean the range. He would also scrub and polish the floors and clean the windows. He would do any little job I wanted doing. Sometimes it needed a bit of going over after he had gone, but I really appreciated his help. He loved his pieces of cake and bread and cheese, and if I made suet pudding or anything like that, he would be very pleased to have some. Often he would come into the kitchen and say, 'Are you making duff (suet pudding)? Because I like that!'

He always kept his cap on. Sometimes when the weather was wet he was soaked, but would never take off the wet clothes. Maybe if he was picking up a bucket of coal, he would suddenly push the cap to one side and smear coal dust all down his face. But that was Jack.

Harold was very fond of Jack, as we all were. When later we moved back to Bath Road, Jack was a regular visitor on his way from Mendip to Wells. I think Harold and I, Dad and the girls, were regarded by Jack as his adoptive family.

Christmas 1939 – Easter 1940

As the winter approached, the evenings became darker, and the days dull, I sometimes felt very lonely. We did not have many visitors, as my friends were doing war-time jobs, and even Aunt Gertie was at Scophony Baird's factory (later EMI, now Racal Thorn Defence Systems), making parachutes. Also some people did not like the idea of walking down the drive when it got dark. Owing to the strict black-out there were no lights anywhere. The hospital had its own ARP (Air Raid Precautions) wardens.

The noises from the patients in the side-rooms used to worry me a little, and sometimes I felt really upset.

But then it was Christmas. My first Christmas at Mendip was one of the happiest I remember. The gardener brought in lots of holly. We decorated the big sitting room with paper shawls which Dad had made. We also had paper chains kept from over the years, and the little artificial Christmas tree bought at Woolworth's for 6d several years beforehand – I still have it. We had a large chicken from the butcher, and plenty of vegetables. I did not make a pudding that year, but the chef of the hospital sent one across. The chefs and kitchen staff did a wonderful job. So did the bakers, managing to make puddings, mince pies and Christmas cakes. Meat was not too much of a problem for Mendip, which had its own slaughter-house, but dried fruit and sugar were another matter.

Both the baker and the chef used prunes and dates as substitutes for raisins and currants, and treacle and syrup to make the sugar go further. We were not too short of things that first Christmas, but problems there certainly were during the rest of the wartime Christmases. Yet the hospital always managed to produce good Christmas fare for all the wards.

The entertainments were reduced now. The church services were held on Sundays as usual. I am not sure about the films, but I think they were still shown for a while. But the balls were cancelled. The orchestra must have disbanded when I was a child, as I never heard it play. My mother had told me how good it was. In the New Year of 1940 we had some severe weather and quite a freeze-up. All the trees in the drive looked beautiful, all silver with icicles. The roads were very slippery, though gangs of patients and staff went out and spread ashes on the drives and pathways.

I became accustomed to the long walk to Wells, whilst Harold, who was managing clerk in a solicitor's office in the Market Place, by Penniless Porch, used to borrow Dad's push-bike to ride to work. It was hard work uphill, coming home.

Then came spring. The war news was bad, and many things were in very short supply. I kept busy with the big house and was now knitting and sewing for our baby. I was very worried about the baby coming. There was no one I could confide in, for my mother and Harold's mother were dead and Harold had no sisters. But we obtained all we needed in readiness for the new arrival. As the evenings became lighter, Harold and I went for little walks around the gardens and *Nettlecombe*, to pick flowers.

At Easter the bakers were very busy, and Henry Batstone, who made the cakes, made hot cross buns. They worked all night on the Thursday and everyone had a bun for Good Friday morning; I cannot recall ever having tasted such good buns.

I did have one especially good friend, 'Auntie' Martin. She had been a friend of Mum; in fact she and her husband (who was a nurse at the

hospital) stayed with us in Bath Road until they could get their own house. A married man's vacancy turned up, so, because of the rule I mentioned earlier, they got married. She was as good as a relative to us and, after the baby was born, used to come to see us and do lots of things to help us with the newcomer.

The War Years

Our baby Mary was born on 10th May 1940, a little early, but absolutely beautiful. On that day, Hitler invaded the Low Countries.

Harold had volunteered for the Pay Corps in order to be able to carry on with the job he knew; he received his papers to join up while I was in the nursing home. As I was not very well at all, the doctor got him a week's compassionate leave, and so he was able to take us home. We went home on the Saturday, had Sunday together, and he left on the Monday.

Dad was delighted with his little granddaughter, and I must not forget Jack, who could not resist taking a look in the pram every time he came in.

I was devastated on the Monday when Harold went off to Bournemouth to start his Army career. I kept telling myself that there were hundreds of people left on their own like me. I think it was the loneliness that hit me the hardest. I was so lucky; I had a dear little baby to care for and Dad was always kind. He was good to be with when there was trouble, because he was always so calm. I suppose it was because of the job he was doing. The working patients that I knew were all interested in Mary. There was Sandy, a tall, thin man who used to deliver the coal with the coalman Bill Pyke. They would bring the coal in a cart with heavy wheels: it must have been hard work to push it along when it was

full. Sandy was a very quiet person. Then there was Bill, who brought the vegetables in from the garden. He was a big chap and a bit gruff. Another was Bill Lower, who helped Mrs Coates at *Bottom Lodge*. He seemed quite a jolly person. One morning he came along to see the baby and brought a beautiful bunch of tulips for me, and a shoe box for Mary. It contained a primrose and an egg. These were 'good-luck charms', he said, to bring good fortune to the baby. Jack was at the house when Bill called, and jealousy reared its ugly head. I arranged the flowers and put them in a vase in the hall. Later in the day when I went through the hall they were gone, and in their place were white pompons; I think they were from a shrub. I asked Jack if he knew anything about this, and the reply was that the flowers were rubbish, he had thrown them away, and his were much nicer. After he had gone for the night, I looked in the little building in the centre of the square which served as a small tip, and sure enough there were the flowers. I retrieved them and rearranged them in another room.

In late June Mary was christened at St Thomas's Church, where we were married. Harold managed to get home on the Saturday, the christening took place on the Sunday morning, and Harold went back in the evening. It was wonderful to see him.

Auntie Martin was always a welcome visitor. She used to help me clean the bedrooms, since Jack did not help upstairs. We would have a cup of tea and a natter. She loved the baby as did her son John, who was aged about eleven.

In July my sister-in-law Alice invited Mary and myself to join her in staying with friends for a fortnight in Bournemouth, our respective husbands being stationed there with the Pay Corps. I was uncertain since I was not very well, but Dad and my doctor thought it would do me good. Of course I wanted to see Harold so much, and Dad assured me that he would be all right in my absence. It worried me a little when we arrived at the coast, that everyone who could was moving away! Harold and his brother Ivor (Alice's husband) were delighted to see us. I did not take

too much for Mary as we only had a fortnight's emergency ration cards; the lovely rocking cot had been left behind and she slept in her pram. Alice's friends Rose and Bob Hallet were shocked when they saw the little baby. They had thought Mary was much older and were worried in case there were any air raids. We saw a good deal of Harold and Ivor, though on some nights they had to do beach guard duty.

Just before we were due to return, a ban was put on Bournemouth: nobody could enter or leave. In the event, therefore, our anticipated fortnight's stay lasted for several months.

For the next six years I spent months at a time with Harold in Bournemouth and the other months with Dad at Mendip. In due course Harold got billeted out to stay at Capstan Road (between Bournemouth and Boscombe), where Auntie Rosie always made us feel welcome. Ivor went abroad, so Alice went back to Street.

Harold had also been due to go abroad, but at the eleventh hour failed the medical on account of a bad tooth. When he enquired if the dental inspector would remove the tooth, the reply was, 'Certainly not. That's not my job; it's my job to *report* it.' Thus Harold stayed in Bournemouth, and who knows in what way that tooth may have affected our future?

I will not elaborate on my time at Bournemouth because this story is really about Mendip. I used to plan the stay with Dad for when Harold had some leave due and could travel home to Wells with us. The journeys were quite smooth on the train – steam, and on lines long since closed. Usually the trains were packed with servicemen, and sometimes one had a job to find a seat. Between Shepton Mallet and Wells we had to travel by taxi. The only taxi driver in Wells was Frank Cardwell, and Dad would arrange for him to meet the train.

I was always pleased to get home, especially when Harold was there as well. Dad would always have baked jacket potatoes in the gas oven, and you could smell them as soon as you walked through the door. On one occasion Dad was still at the hospital, but it was not long before he came

over to welcome us home. He loved Mary, and used to sit on the stairs so that she could have what he called a *little confidential* with Do-Do, as he referred to himself. Jack was always around, and had the range roaring away. It was good to see all the vegetables and fruit in the larder, as in Bournemouth they were none too plentiful. I often had to queue, even for rhubarb. Dad used to send us a box of vegetables by rail from time to time, and this was much appreciated; Auntie Rosie enjoyed them as well.

The air raids had started, and German planes flew over Wells to bomb Coventry, Birmingham and Bristol. I used to get up and take Mary downstairs, whilst Dad always went over to the hospital if there was an alert. Sometimes when I was really frightened, Mary and I would take refuge in the cupboard under the stairs. Dad used to go back and forth to make sure we were all right. I could not let Mary see that I was frightened, so I used to tell her stories; she never realised what was going on.

One night at the height of the bombing raids, while Mary and I were in Bournemouth, a stick of fire bombs was dropped on Mendip. They must have thought the huge boiler house chimney was a factory. Dad's shoe, sock and the bottom of his trouser leg were burned. Fortunately the brigade and staff put out all the fires before the heavy bombers arrived. What would have happened if the hospital had been bombed does not bear thinking about. There were sandbags in the roof all over the hospital. Dad kept the container of the fire bomb that hit him; it looked like a large egg-cup.

In spite of all the worries during the war years, we looked forward to many things, and enjoyed and appreciated any little treats that came along. More and more things were disappearing from the shops. Things were much easier home at Mendip than in Bournemouth. Although *points* were issued with the ration books, to be used for tinned foods, the only meat I remember was spam. Jam was scarce, as was golden syrup; even if you had enough points you could not always find any. I

remember during one stay at Mendip going into Wells to do my shopping, and seeing golden syrup in the World Stores window, for I had been unable to get any in Bournemouth for a long time. The gardener was still sending the fruit – plums, blackcurrants, raspberries and apples. Some of the luxury fruits and vegetables in the garden were taken out to grow more potatoes and cabbage. Dad used to make very good jam; this was a special treat. He did not make a lot, but there was raspberry, blackcurrant, gooseberry and plum. He used brown sugar if it was available, and syrup. It did not taste quite the same as when made with white sugar, but was still delicious. I used to bottle some fruit but did not sweeten it with anything until we used it for stewing. We could seldom make pies as the fat ration was so small. Custard powder was scarce, as was everything of that kind. Porridge oats were also hard to find. But we had much to be very thankful for. Eggs became very scarce. The hens had to be killed off as there was hardly any food for poultry, for that was rationed as well. Then came the dried egg from America. This was useful but in small supply.

One night, very late, a porter came from the hospital to the house to see Dad, accompanied by an American army officer (a few Americans were stationed in Wells at this time). Apparently they had asked to use the recreation hall for a meeting, and had requested tea and light refreshments. Someone had slipped up and forgotten to tell the kitchen staff. The officers had finished their meeting and were awaiting a cup of tea. Dad went across to see what he could do, but the kitchens were all locked and he did not have the kitchen keys. So back they came, and Dad suggested that we make as much tea as we could with what tea and sugar we had. They could return it to us the next day. The officers were well pleased with this. I cannot remember whether or not we let them have any bread and cheese; certainly not biscuits, because they were hard to come by.

Sure enough, the following day a large box was delivered and I could not believe my eyes. Not only had they returned tea and sugar, but also

tins of fruit and biscuits, these items being real luxuries, together with a note expressing their grateful thanks. Mary was thrilled to get a biscuit.

Whenever we were in Bournemouth, Dad continued to send us boxes of vegetables, and sometimes, nestling in the middle of a cabbage or whatever, would be a cake from Henry the baker. When Dad could not find any string (that too was hard to get), he cut down the aerial wire that ran around the sitting room for our old radio, and tied the box up with that. *Where there's a will there's a way* was his motto.

I had not played the piano at all since we lost Mum. Somehow I did not want to. Dad still played the violin when he could. There were three clerks in the office at Mendip at that time, and the youngest was eventually called up. He was also organist at the church and had played the piano for all the smoking concerts.

Winnie Neville from Wells came along on Sundays to play for the services (I cannot remember whether she was a widow or her husband had left her). Her son Trevor was a pupil at the Blue School. She also played piano for country dancing classes at the town hall. Sometimes when Dad could get off duty, he played too. They did several little gigs, for example dances after whist drives at Horrington School. She sometimes came across to the house for a cup of tea on Sundays. I did not mind; I was glad that Dad had a friend for a bit of company, especially when I was in Bournemouth.

So things at Mendip stayed much the same until the wonderful day when at last the war was over. I was staying with Harold at Bournemouth on VE day, and remained until he was demobbed, just before Christmas. It was sad saying goodbye to Auntie Rose and Uncle Bob: they had been so very kind to us over the years. We kept in touch and later visited them. They were very fond of Mary and missed her a lot.

So once more we were all together in Back Lane.

After the War

After the war, in general things were much the same at Mendip, but there were a few changes. Even before the war, conditions for nursing staff had gradually changed. The rule of having to wait for a married man's vacancy had been abolished, making life easier for the nurses. The new Clerk of Works lived at *North Lodge*. The fireman's house, opposite us, was let out to two London evacuees: Miss Skinner who was employed in the kitchen, and Miss David, who worked in the needleroom. Miss Skinner's niece Sylvia was a couple of years older than Mary. So now we had neighbours. The same doctors were still in residence and, as far as I remember, so were all the rest of the former resident staff. Jack was still his usual busybody self. Harold returned to his old job, and Mary started school at Horrington County Junior. I used to take her to the entrance by *North Lodge*, where she would meet a teacher, Miss Wise, who used to push her bike up the hill towards the school. I always fetched Mary after school, Miss Wise riding home downhill. Dad was as busy as ever, but for a long time I had noticed that his left arm and hand were very shaky. Several times I asked him about this, but he always said it was caused by playing vibrato on the fiddle. It was not that at all, but the onset of the wretched Parkinson's disease.

Our new baby was due in May, so I was busy sorting out the best of Mary's baby clothes and making some new ones. The blue valances and

other items for the cot were washed and starched.

So winter passed into spring. We went for all the familiar walks. Harold's brother Ivor had returned from abroad and sometimes he and his wife paid us a visit, now with their little girl, Jennifer.

I was finding the walk uphill to the school difficult sometimes. Jack was overjoyed when he was asked to meet Mary from school. This made him feel very important. But he was good with her and I knew he would bring her home safely. The head mistress told me how he used to walk around the classrooms, look at everything and, no doubt, ask a lot of questions: he never missed a thing if he could help it.

Jane was born, a month early, in the Wells Cottage Hospital. She too was a beautiful baby, heavier than Mary had been. During this time Mary stayed with Auntie Martin in Allen's Lane. She was very fond of Auntie and Uncle Martin and John. Like Mary, Jane was christened at St Thomas's; Gertie, my mother's sister, was her godmother.

Harold had returned to Mr Wilson's in his old job, but was not too happy, as he had ambitions to move on. So, when Jane was about five months old, he obtained a job at County Hall, Taunton. He tried to find somewhere for us to live but, so soon after the war, housing was in short supply.

We also had Dad to think of, for when he retired he would have to stay with us. His shakiness was much worse now. So Harold went into 'digs' and came home at weekends, sometimes on Friday night until Monday morning, but often he had to work on Saturday mornings, not getting home until tea-time. I was not very happy at our being parted again, but at least I had the children to keep me company.

Some of the staff returned to their old jobs at the hospital, and everyone was trying to pick up the pieces again. Rationing was still in force, and everything that had been difficult to obtain during the last six years was still in short supply. The patients who had been evacuated from Basingstoke stayed for quite a long time too. Dad was really due to retire, but the committee asked him to stay on until staffing

problems eased.

An informal concert was given by the staff for the patients in the Hall. It was not a rehearsed concert as in the old days, with chorus numbers, but was successful nevertheless.

As the months went by, things at Mendip gradually improved, and many more changes began taking place.

Mary was showing great interest in the piano. I could have started her off myself as I had had a few pupils before Mum died. But it is not a good idea to teach one's own children, so I sent her to have lessons with Mrs Jones at 10 Vicars' Close. Sylvia Skinner used to have violin lessons with Mr Jones on Saturday mornings, so it was arranged that Mary would walk down with her for her lesson. It worked very well, and Mary proved to be a promising pupil.

When Jane was seventeen months old, another problem arose. Dad had let out our own house for the duration of the war to an accountant from Bath. He now decided to return to Bath, so Georgeville Terrace was left empty. However, at that time the local council was requisitioning all empty properties for homeless families, as no new houses had been built for years. The Town Clerk, Harold Dodd (who was a friend of the family), told Dad that although he himself did not want to do this, the council were pushing him about it: unless someone was living there in a week's time, they would move a family in. We did not know quite what to do. We knew that when Dad retired – which would be as soon as possible, for the Parkinson's had taken quite a hold – the hospital would claim *Back Lane House* for the next Head Nurse.

It so happened that we were the last family to live there. Mr Ware, who eventually took over from Dad, stayed on in his own house in Bath Road, and later the house became the pharmacy.

So began another change for us. It was decided that Harold and I should move down to Bath Road, and that Dad would stay on until he retired. The move was not without its fair share of domestic tensions.

Each day I would see Mary off at the nearby bus stop for her

two-mile journey to school – the fare each way was only three ha’pence! Next I would do any necessary tidying-up and washing, then take Jane in her pram to Back Lane in time to get dinner for us with Dad. There was always something to do around the house as well. Sometimes I pushed the baby up to school to meet Mary, but quite often Jack still met her. We would have tea, and Mary would do her practice (as Dad still had the piano), then we would walk home.

In due course Harold decided to come home from Taunton every day. I was very pleased about this, but worried a lot too, as it was a long bus journey especially in the winter months. He used to leave home at 7.30 a.m. and return at 7.00 p.m. I used to put aside a dinner for him in the middle of the day and push it to 17 Bath Road on the pram to heat for his evening meal.

I must return to the story of Mendip. Dad eventually retired, in very poor health and unable to play his beloved violin.

So we were now all back at the old house. In the following year Harold was transferred from County Hall to Mendip and joined the now ten-strong office staff compared with the three when we first lived there. By the time the hospital closed, certain members of the office staff had their own secretaries, and countless other new positions had been introduced. I smile when I think back over earlier years at how well the hospital had been run – with so many more patients to look after.

Parkinson’s disease now had a hold on Dad, but he had wonderful will-power and was determined not to give in. Mary and Jane were both doing well with music. Mary had started the violin now that she was at the Blue School. Jane, who was at Horrington School, was very good indeed on the piano: later, like Mary, she too played the violin. They really gave their grand-dad a lot of pleasure. He must have been very unhappy at not being able to play any more; he used to say that next to Mum his fiddle was his sweetheart!

Time went on, and although we had a lot of anxious times, we also had many very happy ones. Jane was a pupil at the local ballet school and

After the War

had started taking part in dancing displays just before Dad passed away.
The following year Mendip staff decided to put on a pantomime.

My Involvement with Music at Mendip

I had not played the piano for many years. When Jane's ballet teacher, Pamela Court, asked me if I would play for the children's dancing scenes in the 'panto', I was horrified. I explained that I did not think I could manage it: my fingers would be stiff, and I would be nervous of letting everyone down. But Pamela had such a persuasive way that in the end I gave in. I worried enormously about it.

In the event, all went well. The pantomime was held in the Hall throughout the week bordering January and February. Three nights were for patients from Mendip, Tone Vale (near Taunton), Fishponds and other hospitals including the Priory Hospital in Wells, and for the Darby & Joan clubs. Coaches came from quite a distance. The remaining nights were for staff and friends. Children's night was Friday, whilst Saturday was VIP night: doctors, the committee, and dignitaries of Wells. For every performance the Hall was packed with 400–500 people.

For a couple of years I played just for the children to dance, the musical director accompanying the rest of the show with a small orchestra. Then a radiographer arrived at the hospital. This was Graham (a very attractive young man) who owned a Hammond electric organ and, moreover, played it extremely well. He was asked by the entertainments committee to be the musical director for the next pantomime.

The following year he in turn asked me to play the piano for the

whole show. The organ was placed alongside the piano and we shared the rehearsal work. Graham worked hard with the chorus and soloists alike, and brought them up to a high standard. I was the accompanist. There were among the staff many Irish, Welsh, Spanish and even one or two Greek nurses, male and female, so some of the rehearsals were hectic to say the least, with all the different accents.

The same little girls, now growing up, did the ballet scenes and, as they got older, performed modern musical and tap numbers which were always excellent. Jane took part until she was in her teens. Pam Court did the choreography for all the cast (the routines were always good) and costumes too. The pantomime costumes were excellent, and made by the hospital staff and patients headed by the matron, Miss Finney. We mums supplied our own costumes for the girls. Graham and I worked well together and he gave me a lot of confidence. He then thought it would be a good idea if we got together with Brian, the drummer who joined us for panto week, and formed a trio.

In my teenage years I had played piano for Dad and his little group who worked under the name of the Premier Dance Orchestra. In those days a lot of whist drives, followed by a dance, were held, not only in Wells but also in the villages around. I must add that although we were booked from 10 p.m. until 1 a.m. it was nothing to carry on perhaps until 2 o'clock. One dear old family friend at Henton would persuade us to stay: 'just another ten minutes, Joe', knowing that Dad would always give in. Often he had to be on duty again at 6.30 a.m., and all for the large fee of 2s 6d. They were the 'good old days' – or bad, as bands of today would say!

The trio with Graham worked out well. Not only did we play for the patients' dances in the Hall alternate Wednesdays from 6 to 8.30 p.m., but other gigs as well, including some of the staff dances held in either the Hall or the Social Club on the Frome Road. We also played a lot at Cedar House, the EMI club in Chamberlain Street, and at various dinner dances at the local hotels. Graham was married and lived at Wookey, a

little village outside Wells. He had a big car and a trailer, so was able to take me and the organ around as well.

Then after two or three years Graham moved to Bournemouth. I was really sorry when he left, as it had been such a pleasure working with him. Pam, who was now married to farmer Bernard Hale, gave birth to twins. She sold the dancing schools at Wells, Glastonbury and Frome to Gill from Bristol, who asked me to play for her. Winnie Neville, who had been pianist for Pam, was not too well and did not want to start again with a new teacher. I really did not want to take this on. However, as my daughters were now studying piano and violin – Mary at the Royal Academy of Music in London, and Jane in her turn at Trinity College, London – I needed a bit of extra money to help them. After being out of the music world for so long I was now truly back in it.

More changes were taking place at the hospital at this time. On Wednesdays there was a dance one week and a whist drive the next. This was usually the pattern from September until around Easter when the nights were lighter. In the summer the patients were out and about, and there was more freedom for parole now. After the war the building work at the female nurses' home was finished. It really was a super place. New houses were built on the Frome Road side of the main drive, including one for the Medical Superintendent (who was now Dr Bridger). *Westfield* was now used for those male patients whose health was not too bad, and they almost went in and out as they pleased. There was now also a training school for the nurses.

The patients were allowed to shop at the canteen next to the cricket pavilion adjoining the staff social club. In later years another social club room and canteen for tea and coffee for the patients was opened alongside the nurses' home and tennis courts. This canteen was built by the WVS. They served tea, coffee, snacks and hot drinks, and later had a stock of such items as soap, toothpaste, sweets, biscuits, tights for the ladies and socks for the men. They eventually paid off the cost of the building, and any money over was given to the hospital.

In later years on 5th November there was a large bonfire, with a fire-works display on the cricket pitch for patients, the staff and their families.

At Christmas there was a party in the hall for the children of the staff, with presents from Father Christmas, and the very tall fir tree in the centre front of Mendip was adorned with dozens of lights. It was the steeplejack's job to decorate this one! The tree could be seen plainly from the Bristol Road, and made a wonderful sight. It could also be seen from Knapp Hill and Frome Road. Unfortunately, however, on the Bath Road the church steeple got in the way.

There were still some closed and locked wards, but many were now open, and the patients had a lot more freedom. Some of them worked, doing jobs such as making pens, and some in the OT (occupational therapy) department made trays and stools and all sorts of other things: lovely wool rugs and tablecloths. These were sold to members of staff.

Dr Bridger's wife organised a group of people from Mendip and Wells forming the *Friends of Mendip*. Dances, whist drives and jumble sales were held to raise money. Later, the Friends combined a fête with the Patients' Sports Day, and arranged stalls around the cricket pitch. The OT always had a stand and sold all the items I have mentioned earlier, including soft toys. Some of these were lovely. I always fall for teddy bears anyway!

I turn now to my involvement in the pantomimes and dances.

The Pantomime Years

Graham's departure for Bournemouth meant that a new musical director was needed for the coming pantomime, and I was asked to fill the bill. I had always been nervous, and this was to be a big step for me. I had never directed a show before, but knew just what a lot of work would have to be put in. I agreed to do it, and was determined to do my best to help them.

Tom Calvert (Chief Male Nurse now, whom everyone addressed as 'Sir') was the producer. He and I together went through the script, which I took home and read carefully. After the auditions for the principals, I sorted out the music. The Mendip had hardly any music, but we had a large selection at home. I bought any other songs needed, and Mendip would pay for them.

There was always quite a lot of talent among the staff, and we put on a good show with an excellent chorus. The ballet school still provided the speciality numbers and front-cloth solos or duets.

We usually started rehearsals at the end of September for a show at the end of January. During the Christmas period it was always difficult to rehearse as there were always functions in the Hall and ward parties, etc. We therefore tried to get as much as we could done before Christmas. It was the old story: everyone was eager to be in it, but missed half the rehearsals, so that what you did with half of them one week had to

be done again the next week for the other half. Tom used to say in his North Country accent: "This is never going to go on!" But it did. I used to get into trouble at home for spending so much time at the rehearsals.

It was a job I did for love: there was no payment attached to it. But the cast always gave me a present on the last night, sometimes flowers; indeed the music case I still use was a gift from them. My payment was the pleasure the pantomime gave to so many people, some of whom did not have much to look forward to in life. We were so lucky at Mendip to put on an entertainment as large as the pantomime. We had the huge stage in the Hall, with all the drop (three lots) of curtains; electricians and carpenters etc. who were the stage staff; and large dressing rooms with wash-basins and so forth (the principals had their own rooms as did the male and the female chorus members whilst the children used the church approach to change in). Most of the scenery and props were made at the hospital, though some things we had to hire, such as the giant's head, and fluorescent and strobe lighting; everything else we had. The wardrobe mistress did a good job with so many costumes to organise and make.

I often think of some of the beautiful scenes we achieved, for example the pixie and fairy scenes in the woodland. The children's ballet shoes, gloves and pixie ears were treated with the special chemical fluid, and the toadstools, large enough for the children to hide under, were painted in bright colours with white spots. The special fluorescent lamp was placed in the centre front of the stage. It was very powerful and we had to make sure that the children did not look directly at it.

The introductory music for the dance started as the curtains went back to show a darkened stage. All you could see were the toadstools, the children's fingers and toes, and the pixies' ears: it was a beautiful sight. This lasted for just a few minutes, and then the coloured lights, operated from the organ loft, gradually lit up the whole stage as the dance came to its end and the lights went down again, leaving you to see the scene as it had started. It always received great applause. We did a

chorus number, *Hernando's Hideaway* – a tango rhythm – using these lights. The chorus also came onto a darkened stage, and all you could see were the girls' shoes and the flowers in their hair and on their dresses. The men's white shirts and shoes and their hands were all treated. The number was sung through like this, then the lights went up to show the dance routine. For an amateur production it was first class. We also had a gauze curtain which gave a lovely underwater picture, and the frozen carbon dioxide for the mist effects.

Unfortunately, at a Saturday night performance one year they overdid the dry ice, and it rolled down the stage like a huge wave right out over the orchestra pit. We could not see the music and it nearly choked us, but we played on and laughed about it afterwards.

Another very colourful scene was the ballet in Aladdin's Cave. The children wore white tutus with foil overskirts and a design on the bodice to represent whichever jewel they were. I got a small orchestra together. If Mary and Jane were home, they would play violins for us.

We played in a sunken pit with rails in front of the stage and curtains to box us in. We had quite a good upright piano but the Friends of Mendip decided to provide a grand, for Hall use only. This made a difference and was a joy to play. At first it was kept locked, with a heavy cover over it. But in later years it was not given the care it merited, and this used to annoy me very much.

There was now a resident chaplain living at the *Bottom Lodge*, and he decided to have the piano moved to the church, leaving us once again with an old upright (not the original one). In later years the saxophonists had great difficulty tuning to it, as it was so far below concert pitch. When I told Mrs Bridger one day, she was most annoyed, and I am sure it was through her that the grand was soon returned to the Hall.

We used to hold a party after the last night of the panto, sometimes in the Hall and on other occasions in the Social Club. Everyone enjoyed themselves, with plenty of refreshments provided, some of an alcoholic nature. The cast had a whale of a time singing each other's 'numbers'. So

I was very sad when we could not get enough staff interested enough to produce another show and the plans had to be called off.

I was then asked to play for Wells Operatic Society, which I decided to do, and worked with a wonderful Musical Director, John Davies, who also gave me great encouragement and is now a very good friend of the family. Two or three years later a few of the Mendip staff revived the pantomime, though on a smaller scale. I could not help them as the dates clashed with the 'Operatic'. I did arrange for the children to dance, and managed to rehearse and play for them. Unfortunately it only ran for a couple of years. I suppose the fact was that most people were now able to get around more to see shows, and also television had taken over.

But thinking back to the pantomime years and looking at all my photos still evokes happy memories.

The Dancing Years

When Graham went to Bournemouth, I formed a group to continue playing for the dances. We usually worked as a trio, or a quartet: tenor and alto sax, drums and me. However, if a bigger band was required, I had a bass player and occasionally a violin. We built up a good reputation, calling ourselves the Mendip Melody Makers. Not only did we play for the patients' dances, but we were also engaged to play for dinner dances and Christmas parties in the hotels in Wells and district. For several years we played for the New Year dinner dance at *The Star*.

We were also the interval band for the big bands engaged for the many balls held at Mendip, including the Hunt, Farmers' and NFU. These were real highlights for me. Stuart Eddy and his Orchestra from Torquay were my favourites. They used to be the ship's orchestra on the *Queen Elizabeth*. They played for many wonderful dances at Mendip.

We also played for various staff functions. The Police Ball was also held there, as the Mendip ballroom was always considered the best in the West of England. Well-known names such as Joe Loss, Andy Ross, Sid Lawrence, Acker Bilk and Victor Sylvester appeared with their bands. There were also military band orchestras, together with several local bands including the Skymasters from Street, the Winter Gardens Weston resident band, and the well-known Radstock band led by Bernard Emm. Victor Sylvester and I had a long conversation, and he was

pleased when I told him I always tried to get my group to play in his style of ‘strict tempo’: *slow, slow, quick, quick, slow*. Everyone could dance to his music.

During the pantomime years and for a while afterwards, patients’ dances in the Hall were well supported by the nursing staff. Most of the panto cast attended and they did their utmost to make the evening enjoyable for the patients. Especially around Christmas time, spot prizes and refreshments were provided, and this always went down well. Many of the patients who had been unwilling to get up and dance (preferring to sit and watch) now joined in.

Our Jack, who was still busybodying around, would turn up only if there was anything ‘to be had’, as he would say. Another character was Johnny Tooze – Toozer, as he was called. He was a short man who had been a patient at the hospital for years. He was always a keen follower of football, and Saturdays would see him hurrying down the Bath Road to watch Wells play.

Many patients, both men and women, kept on their caps and hats during the dance. On the other hand, many others wore evening dress for the occasion. I look back on those evenings with great affection.

As the years went on, yet another new job was added to Mendip’s list: that of Entertainments Manager. He arranged dances, whist drives, and also bingo, concerts, socials and so on. He also supervised the Christmas decorations for the Hall and ordered trimmings for the rest of the hospital. Gone were the days of the handmade paper decorations and the festoons of greenery. There were now very elaborate foil decorations – fire regulations were now much stricter.

I would like to mention in my story how one year during Christian Aid week in the spring a charity variety concert was held in the Hall, organised by the Wells Christian Aid Committee. Jane brought along her Suzuki Baby Violin Class, children as young as three and four years, as well as her advanced violin pupils. I had some piano pupils, so between us we put on a selection of string and piano duets and solos.

Jane's two daughters Jo and Emily, and son Daniel all played piano and violin. Thinking back now, my father would be so pleased to think that I, both my daughters and three of my grandchildren have all kept up the music that brought him to Mendip in the first place.

At this point I should say a few words about Commander Le Fluefer (although goodness knows whether I have spelt his name correctly). He had not been a patient at Mendip for very long before he helped to start a patients' social club, and this was quite a success. He edited a newsletter, well written and well laid out, in which he wrote about the films, dances and other activities that concerned the club. He always brought me a copy of the newsletter during the dance.

In the latter years when Mendip was winding down, we played for parties in some of the wards. In Boyd Ward I remember that we had a Hallowe'en Night. The patients and staff had taken great care in decorating the ward. There were many large pumpkins (the one on the piano I brought home: it was as much as I could do to lift it). Witches, broomsticks, black cats and spiders' webs featured too – it was a highly spooky ensemble. Refreshments were plentiful, so you can imagine that everyone had a good night, with male and female patients from other wards joining in.

At Eastertime the theme of the decorations would be lambs and ducks, together with chickens and Easter eggs. Many of the animals and other decorations were painted and cut out to hang on the walls in the Occupational Therapy department. At Christmas I often played for carols in some of the wards that were still locked.

As the years rolled on, many rumours were abroad to the effect that Mendip was to close. Then, believe it or not, the ballroom was refurbished at a cost of thousands of pounds. The original roof had been rafters or beams with the dome in the centre; between the beams it was all glass, and for that reason the Hall was not used during the war. The glass was painted. The Orchestron was sent off to a museum and the loft removed. No longer did pictures hang on the walls. The ceiling was

lowered and expensive modern lighting installed. The décor was very good too. The floor, however, was no longer so well maintained as it had been in the past, and suffered the ultimate insult of being marked out for badminton.

Many of the patients were discharged to houses found for them in Wells, Frome and Weston-super-Mare, and many also moved to *Meare Manor*. This was a large house near Glastonbury which had been taken over by the National Health Service. A few of the nursing staff from Mendip transferred there too. The houses in Wells district did not have resident nursing staff but were, I understand, regularly supervised. Near to us were two adjoining houses, one for women, the other for men. The patients looked after themselves.

So much money had been spent on the Hall that there was speculation among some of the staff that Mendip might be taken over as an open prison, but nothing like this ever happened.

During those years the kitchen gardens were wound down, and the farms also suffered. I just could not understand the logic of buying when they could grow all they wanted. It used to make me feel very sad to drive up the Bath Road and see from over the wall the gardens with nothing planted or growing in them.

In the last couple of years before the closure of Mendip, we no longer had any patients' dances. The reason given was that the staff could not be allowed to be at the dances as they were needed elsewhere.

I used to meet some of the patients when I went shopping in the town and they would tell me how they missed and wanted their dances, but although I tried I was unable to get them started again. All the same, I realised that the patients who were still there had a lot more going for them than in the old days: television, outings to pantomimes, and the seaside in summer. But many of them still missed those dances.

The last time I played for the patients was at Christmas 1990 when I, on my own, was asked to play for a party in Westlake Ward. The ward was beautifully decorated and visitors were invited to join in. They had

plenty of food, sherry and beer, and of course tea and coffee. I played a selection of music including all the Christmas tunes, and *Jingle Bells* for the arrival of Father Christmas, ending up with Christmas carols.

As I drove home I found it hard to believe that this was the last time I would be looking back at the lighted windows of the 'big house', as I had thought of it so many years previously.

The Last Waltz

In March 1991 the committee at Mendip decided to put on twin events that everyone would enjoy and remember: a tea dance and a ball.

The tea dance was held in the staff social club in the afternoon, my trio providing the music: Sidney Hodges on sax, Roly Brooks on percussion, and myself on piano. We played many of the old pantomime songs, which sparked off an enthusiastic sing-song. Dr Bridger, the Medical Superintendent, gave an excellent speech which earned great applause.

The ball was held in the Hall on the evening of the same day. Although my trio had acquitted itself well, the main band now, assisted by a supporting band, was the incomparable Acker Bilk and his Paramount Jazz Band. As I have already mentioned, Acker Bilk had played for many dances at the hospital over the years.

Tickets were limited, and I was lucky enough to take my daughter Jane with her friend Gerald, granddaughter Emily and her boyfriend. Harold was unfortunately unable to attend, as he was not in the best of health.

Inside the main entrance to the hospital was a display of photographs covering events over the years, including the concert parties in which my father had taken a major part, and the pantomimes for which I had provided the music. Several of the photographs featured Jane in the

dancing scenes as a little girl. Hospital cricket matches and patients' sports days were also recalled.

As I drove home along the front of the hospital late that evening, I reflected that I had indeed heard the last waltz.

Appendix I

Historical Perspective

*From the Order of Service
of a Service of Thanksgiving for
143 years of the Mendip Hospital,
held in Wells Cathedral, 17th April 1991*

The Mendip Hospital opened its doors to its first patients, Sarah Symes and William Wilkins, in March 1848 and, in that year of European revolutions, began a revolution of its own in the humane and enlightened treatment of the mentally ill.

In time the Hospital became practically self-sufficient, with its own laundry, gardens, farm and brewery, in addition to all the departments needed in any busy hospital.

From that day in 1848, numbers of patients grew steadily until, by the mid-1950s, almost 1,000 were resident.

After that, advances in treatment, with improved medication and a wider range of therapy, reduced considerably the numbers of those who needed residential care in the Hospital. By the early 1980s there were 450 of them and this reduction has continued at such a rate that the Hospital has at last been closed.

The fact that, in recent years, the treatment of mental illness, with its

emphasis on care in the community, has changed so much in no way diminished the outstanding achievement of the Mendip Hospital. Moreover, throughout its time, those once resident there and subsequently living successfully in the community have continued greatly to rely on its staff and its facilities.

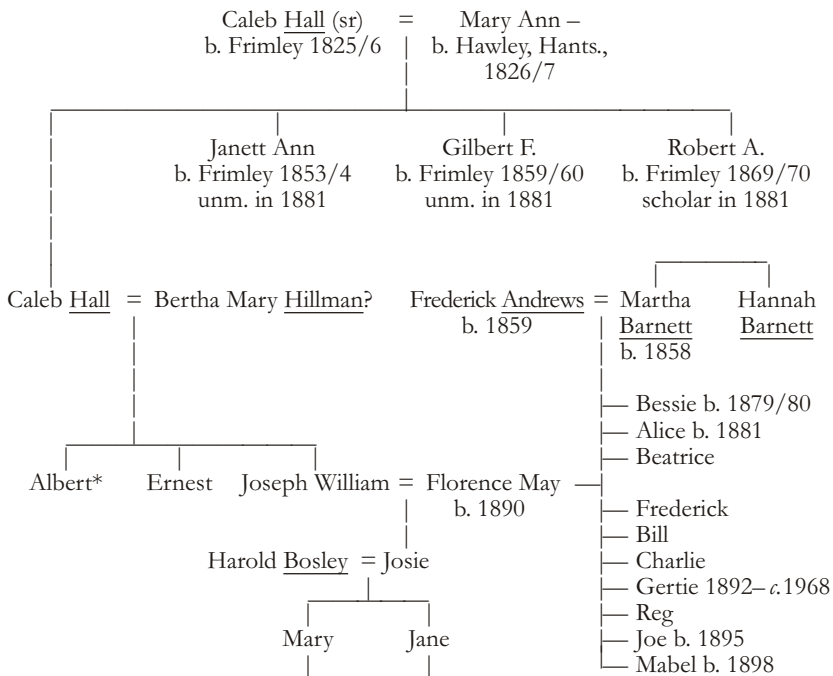
Wells has been intensely proud of Mendip, holding the Hospital in something close to affection. Much devoted voluntary work has been done there by local people and, in its heyday, the Hospital provided a good deal of employment in an area where work is often hard to find.

It is fitting that we should gather together to give thanks to God for all that the Mendip Hospital has been to this district during its 143 years, praying that the work it faithfully did for so long may grow and develop in the changed circumstances of these days.

Appendix II

Author's Family History

Miriam Josephine ('Josie') Bosley née Hall



*In fact, Caleb Albert (1881 Census)

Caleb Hall (jr) had a smallholding and an inn, *The Miners' Arms*, at Mytchett, Surrey.

Caleb's son Joseph was Head Nurse at the Mendip Hospital from 1938 to 1949. In his earlier years he had been a member of the resident fire brigade.

The 1881 Census shows Frederick Andrews, his wife Martha, and daughter Bessie living at 'Bath Road, Wells St Cuthbert Out'. Even then, at the age of 21, he would have been working and living at the Mendip Hospital (then the County Lunatic Asylum). He retired and died in around 1920, when the author was two. He had been living at 2 Georgeville Terrace, now 19 Bath Road, having bought this house on his retirement.

Appendix III

Author's Education

Miss Mogford's School

Georgie Mogford opened a small school for young children at 61 St Thomas Street, Wells. The house was double-fronted, old fashioned, and with flagstone floors.

Most of the children were around five or six years old when they started. I was six, and three of my friends started at the same time in 1924, namely Leonora Shepherd, and Henry and Ina Norton. Other friends included Joan Mullins, Joan and Margaret McDonald, and George Jacobs, who subsequently became Manager at the Diploma Cheese Factory (now Nutricia) on the Glastonbury Road.

The school day began at 9.00 a.m. and finished at 3.00 p.m., with an hour and a half for dinner, I always remember the trays of sand and wooden skewers which we used to practise our writing. It was a great day when we were eventually given slates, and slate pencils!

I recall too the geography lessons and our saying together, 'The world is as round as an orange, flat at the top and flat at the bottom.' Miss Mogford was the church organist, so it is not surprising that we did lots of singing. At lunchtime we would have a cup of cocoa, for which we paid a penny.

In the summer we had a picnic on Tor Hill. Mrs Mogford made

sandwiches, and lemonade made from yellow and pink sherbet. We had a lovely time playing games on the hill.

At Christmas we had a party with a big tree. Mrs Mogford dressed little dolls for the girls, and the boys were given clockwork cars. I remained at Miss Mogford's until I was eight.

Oakleigh School

From Miss Mogford's, I transferred to Oakleigh School, in the building now occupied by the Wells Museum, on the Cathedral Green. Its headmaster was Mr Frederick Brooke, while the other teachers were his wife Isabel, his mother-in-law Mrs Knight (who used to wheel herself about in a wheelchair), Miss Jones and Miss Porch.

My best friend Leonora Shepherd moved with me to Oakleigh. Other friends included Jack Danes, Joyce and Arthur Kenny (who lived at 5 Vicars' Close), Sheila and Peter Parrot (whose parents ran the Gatehouse Tearooms), Karl Pickering and Alan Southwood.

Like Miss Mogford's, Oakleigh was a private school. I cannot remember precisely how much the fees were. On the other hand, I do recall that everything had to be paid for: books for writing and drawing, in addition to the text books. There were also extras, such as tennis and ballet classes, although a cup of cocoa still cost only a penny!

The girls' uniform comprised a smart green gym slip, a blazer, a hat and a white blouse, and for the summer a green dress and a panama hat bearing the school badge. The boys wore short grey trousers, a green blazer and a cap with the school badge.

We attended the Cathedral for special services on St Andrew's Day and St George's Day.

When I was fourteen, the school moved to a new building in Priory Road, where I spent my final two terms.

Apprenticeship

At fourteen I began a three-year apprenticeship at *Madame Kate's Millinery and Gowns*. My working hours were long, for the shop stayed open until 7 p.m. on weekdays, and 8 on Saturdays. During Christmas week the hours were even longer, with closing times of 10.30 or even 11 p.m. But it was fun.

On the third floor was a hairdressing and beauty parlour. This was so popular that advance booking was always necessary.

I was paid five shillings per week in my first year, seven shillings and sixpence in my second, and ten shillings in my third.

Appendix IV

Photographs

Opposite: Plan of the ground floor of the Hospital. (1874)

SOMERSET COUNTY EUNATIC ASYLUM WELLS.

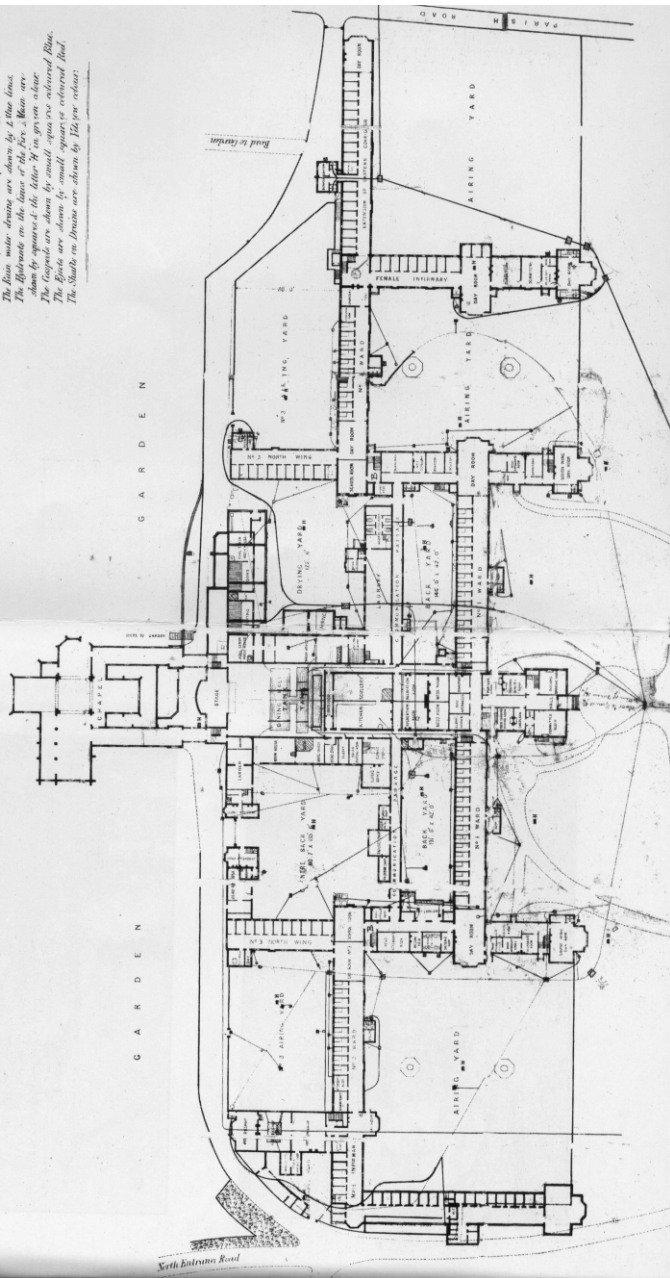
ARRANGEMENT OF THE GROUND FLOOR.

1874.

Scale Reduced to 1/4 inch.

Refractory

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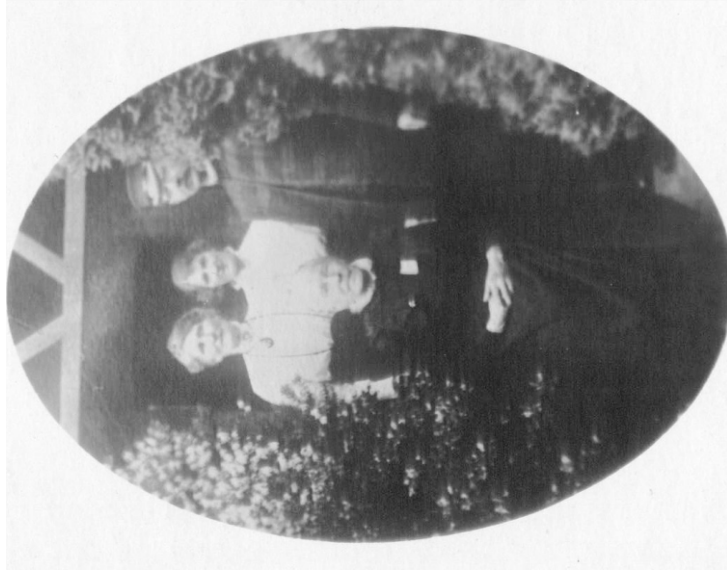




Joseph Hall's father Caleb, at *Nightingale Cottage*,
81 Mytchett Road Frimley Green, Surrey.



Caleb's wife, Bertha Mary (née Hillman?),
also at 81 Mytchett Road.



Author's maternal grandparents Frederick and (front)
Martha Andrews outside Head Attendant's house.
Back: Martha's sister Hannah (l); author's mother
Florence May Andrews (centre). (c. 1904)



Head Attendant, Frederick Andrews,
outside his house. (c. 1904)



Author's cousin Bill Andrews, a messenger boy at the Hospital. (1904)



Author's parents, Joseph William Hall and Florence May Andrews,
before they married.



Joseph William Hall in his fireman's uniform.



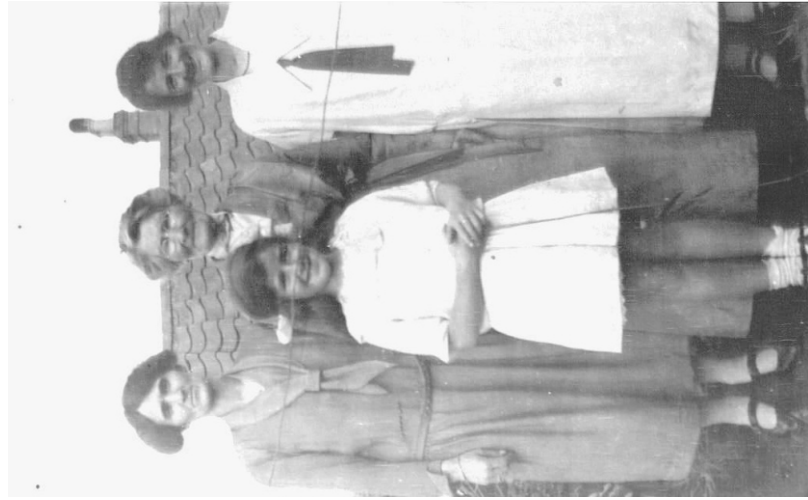
Author, aged 4 months.



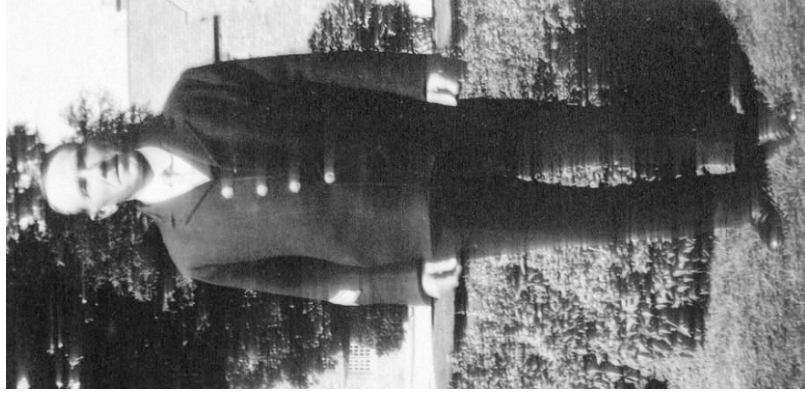
Author's mother, Florence May Andrews. (1915)



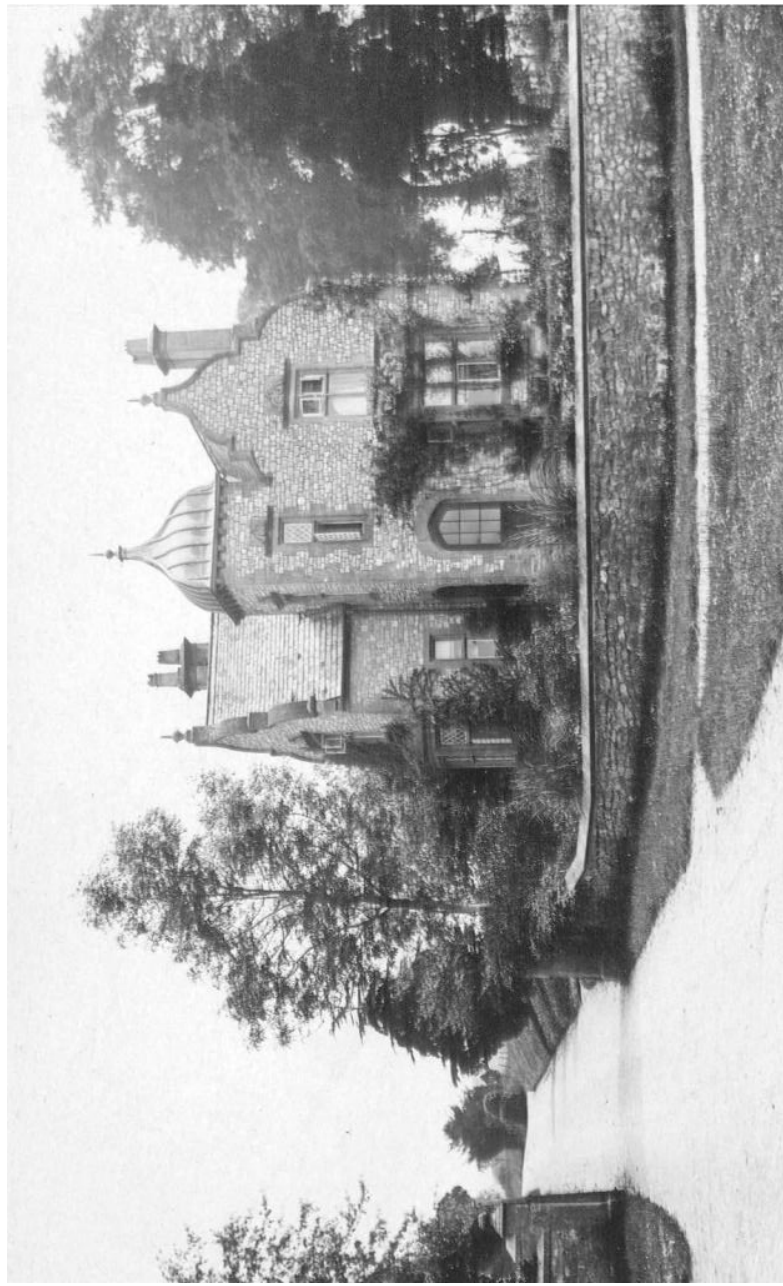
Nurse (Lucy? a cousin of the author's mother) at Hospital. (c. 1920)



Front: author. Back: mother's sister Gertie (l), mother's mother Martha, mother Florence (R). (c. 1927)



Joseph Hall in charge-nurse uniform. (1930s)



Bottom Lodge, Knapp Hill.



Sports Day, Joseph Hall (1), wearing cap, Nurses' Home under construction. (1930s)



Concert party. Joseph Hall, centre, playing banjo. (1930s)



Back: Ted Blacker (1), Arnold Baseley (5th from L), Billy Henderson (R).
 Middle: Dr Darlington (centre), Dorothy Varcoe (3rd from R), Joseph Hall (R). (1933)



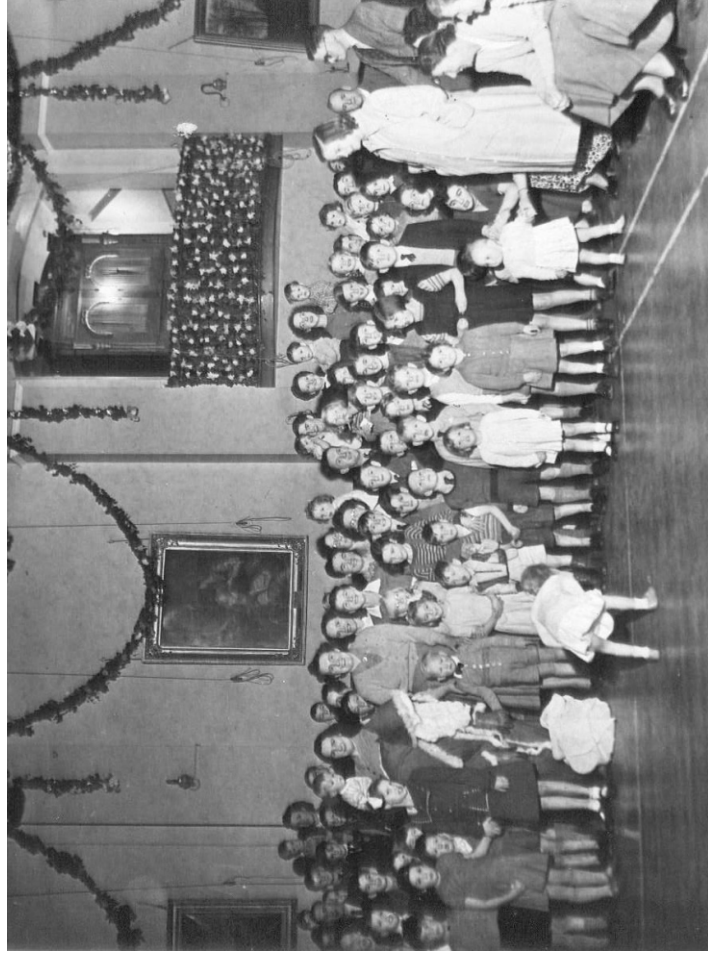
Back: Bert Linnett (L), Ted Blacker (5th from L), Flo Varcoe (2nd from R),
Joseph Hall (R). Front: Bessie Pugh (centre). (1933)



Violinist Joseph Hall. (1934)



Joseph Hall, dressed for a fancy-dress ball. (c. 1935)



Children's party, Ballroom. Top R: the Orchestron. Father Christmas holds – Kitson. L of Father Christmas: Judy Sankey. Girl front centre R, dark shoes, straddling white line: – Burge. The author's daughter Jane is the smiling girl with plaits, below Orchestron. Jane's sister Mary is immediately L of Jane. Immediately R of and slightly obscured by Jane is Mrs Coles, carrying her daughter Jenny. The middle of the three women carrying children at the back is Myrtle Williams. (c. 1951)



The author at the piano with her dance group. (Late 1950s)



Mendip Melody Makers. L to R: John Ashley, the author, Joe Little, Graham Lawson (on Hawaiian guitar), Les Laws. (c. 1960)



Pantomime. Jack Mitchell and chorus ladies including Miss Hodges (L), Margaret Hanson (4th from L) and Sheila Challenger (R). (1960s)



Pantomime chorus. Front: Margaret Maidment (2nd from L), Sheila Challenger (4th from L), Nola Challenger (5th from L). Middle: Marlene Church (R). Back: Norman Church (2nd from R). The lady R at the front and the 3rd lady from the R in the middle row are the Kitson twins. (1960s)



Full cast of *Aladdin*. Back centre: Margaret Hanson (Principal Boy), Jean Chitty (Princess). (Early 1960s)



Aladdin, Karen Symonds with girls of the Frome School of Dancing.



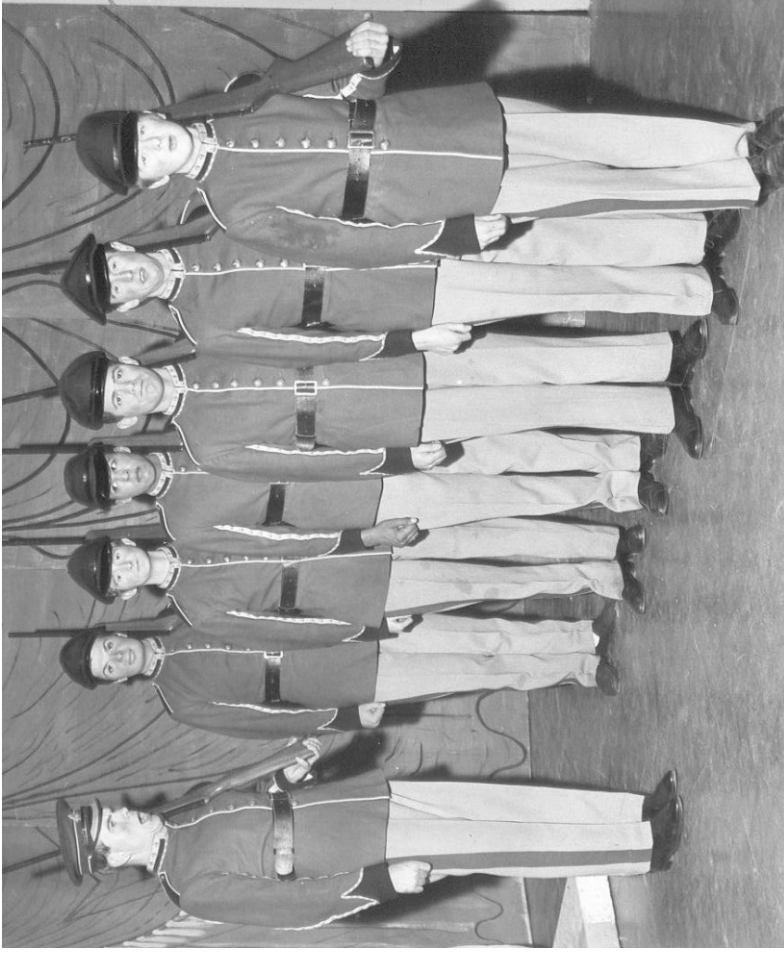
Aladdin, principals. On thrones: Jean Chitty (L), Margaret Hanson (R).
Kneeling: Karen Symonds (L), Myrtle Williams (R).



Standing (L to R): Jill Gallop, Susan Chinn, unknown, author's daughter Jane.
Front Wendy Chamberlain (L), Denise Abbot (R),



A ball at the Hospital. L to R: the bandleader Victor Sylvester, Barry Bignal (brother of the athlete Mary Bignal Rand), the author (whose trio played in the interval), Norman Church (a member of the building staff) and Keith Fletcher (a nurse). (1960s)



Men of pantomime chorus. L to R: Tony Morrison, Nikos Loutraris, Keith Fletcher, Kim Banwell, unknown, Norman Church, unknown; all nursing staff. (Early 1960s)



Robin Hood, full cast. Margaret Hanson (Robin Hood). Bill Manning (piano). With children from the Frome School of Dancing. (1960s)



Sleeping Beauty, full cast and chorus. The author (at piano), Keith Down (bottom L, alto saxophone), Geoff Whitcombe (bottom centre, tenor saxophone).



Madame Kate's (in 2012 an estate agent's office), High Street, Wells. The window dressed for the Coronation of George VI and Queen Elizabeth in 1937. The author standing L, seated Leonora Shepherd. The figure on R is a dummy!



The Head Attendant's House, Back Lane. (1999)



The author at 17 Bath Road. (1999)

In this little book Josie Bosley recalls the period when, as daughter of the Chief Male Nurse, she lived at the Mendip Hospital, Wells, Somerset, in the 1930s and 1940s. The butchers, the bakers, the dairy, the grounds, the hall, the parties and the entertainments come to life again.

There are earlier recollections too: of smoking concerts, the hospital orchestra and the fire brigade.

This is a well-observed memoir of the life of the staff and patients at Mendip Hospital during the last century until its closure.